

Deconstructing Gender Differences

in Persuasibility: A Bricolage

Kimber Charles Pearce

University of North Carolina, Greensboro

Elizabeth J. Natalle

University of North Carolina, Greensboro

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The study of persuasion long has been a central preoccupation of communication theorists and critics. As a cornerstone in communication theory, persuasion research has provided the impetus for inquiries into how symbolic behavior effects social and personal change. A number of metatheoretical issues have emerged from empirical studies of gender and persuasibility that are of concern to feminist theorists. Scott (1988) argues that poststructural theory, or deconstruction, is an avenue for understanding how "traditions of (Western) philosophy have systematically and repeatedly construed the world hierarchically in terms of masculine universals and feminine specificities" (p. 33). Scott contends that such a construction has put a "conceptual hold" on our thinking about gender and behavior (p. 33). Research on gender and persuasibility suffers from this conceptual hold and is ripe for deconstruction to bring about alternative ways for communication theorists to think about the relationship between gender and persuasibility. The following analysis focuses specifically on persuasive messages and attitude change rather than the general concept of influenceability which entails compliance, agreement, conformity, and related ideas.

Between 1930 and 1986, experimental research on gender differences and persuasibility grew out of a biological-theoretical paradigm where sex differences, rather than gender, function as independent variables associated with inherent personality traits, resulting in a dichotomy where male and female are set in binary opposition. In such a dichotomy, meaning is sought primarily from the male position (Derrida, 1976). What is male is viewed as powerful and positive, in contrast to what is female, which is viewed as muted and negative. Because of a gender bias, serious questions arise about theory generated

from over a fifty-year period of gender and persuasibility research. From a feminist perspective, deconstruction (Derrida, 1976) is a valuable methodology that can reveal alternative meanings about persuasion and gender.

Feminism and Deconstruction

Feminist critiques of science have become popular as feminism increasingly removes itself from scientific inquiry. Sayers (1987) contends that a feminist rejection of science has "been provoked by the failure of science to attend to women's needs and interests" (p. 68). Sayers and others (McHugh, Koeske, & Frieze, 1986; Rakow, 1986; Wallston & Grady, 1985) have presented cogent arguments outlining biases in mainstream scientific research which reflect biases of the larger patriarchal society. Feminist criticism argues that social scientific inquiry is not value-free, sexist approaches persist in methodologies, and generalizability is significantly diminished when the larger frame of race, class, and gender is imposed on the interpretation of experimental findings. While a feminist perspective admittedly is not itself value-free, the alternative approach to interpretation that such deconstruction offers is functional for broadening the scope of scientific application to people's lives.

Deconstruction, like feminism, is a postmodern response that posits a world view in which a multiplicity of meanings exist and challenges the fallacious concept of dominant truth. In communication studies, postmodernism often is viewed as a rhetorical method (Brock, Scott, & Cheseboro, 1989). However, upon inspection it is apparent that deconstruction is a critical perspective that has application to a wide range of epistemics, including science (Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1988).

Science, when viewed as socially-constructed discourse (Gergen, 1985; Gross, 1990; Krippendorff, 1989; Prelli, 1989, 1990), finds itself susceptible to cultural influences which, in Derrida's (1976) estimation, leave behind a trace (track, footprint, imprint). Derrida's (1976) vision of deconstruction as a method for tracing cultural aspects of socially constructed discourse drew from anthropologist Levi-Strauss' (1962) conception of "bricolage" as a "prior science" which is not a specialized theoretical approach, but a more global and objective critical tool—one that a naïve critic might employ: "This critical search for a new status of discourse is the stated abandonment of all reference to a *center*, to a *subject*, to a privileged *reference*..." (Derrida, 1978, p. 286). Therefore,

as a "bricoleur," one must seek alternative meanings for discourse by abandoning the confines of paradigmatic perspectives to expose the limits of the discourse and deny the truth-value of any subjective applications. This study will attempt to deconstruct gender and persuasibility research in the mode of a "bricoleur": to describe specific authorities, historical, social, and institutional, that guided researchers' choices; identify traces of those authorities in the research; and deconstruct discontinuities in the evolution of the research.

The body of empirical research regarding gender and persuasibility evolved as what Foucault (1972) has identified as a *discursive formation*: any socially constructed discourse with a historical and institutional structure. As a discursive formation, traces of specific authorities are present in the discourse of the research. These authorities include rules and processes of appropriation of discourse that confine the right to speak, the ability to understand, and the capacity to invest the discourse in decisions, institutions, or practices to a particular group of individuals (Foucault, 1972). Deconstruction reveals the function of the biological-theoretical paradigm as a specific authority in prototypical studies within gender and persuasibility research and displays discontinuities (or disruptions) in the knowledge that was constructed.

1930-1970: The Biological Conceptual Field

The discursive formation is fractured into two periods: The first (1930-1970), is characterized by alpha bias or exaggeration of sex differences; the second (1970-1986) is characterized by beta bias or the inclination to ignore or minimize differences. According to Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1988), "in hypothesis testing, alpha or Type I error involves reporting a significant difference when one does not exist; beta or Type II error involves overlooking a significant difference when one does exist" (p. 457).

Earlier studies which conceptualized only biological sex exhibited significant tendencies toward exaggerating differences in research reports and a trend to derive significance from secondary results where sex of the subject and persuasibility were not the primary focus. Both inclinations are revealed in Cronkhite's (1969) review of the earlier studies:

The evidence seems to indicate overwhelmingly that women are generally more persuasible than are men. The same relationship has been found by Knower (1936), Wegrocki (1934), Bowden,

Caldwell, and West (1934), Willis (1940), Bateman and Remmers (1941), Haiman (1949), Paulson (1954), Pence and Scheidel (1956), King (1959), Janis and Field (1959), Furbay (1965), and Schiedel (1963), using various subject populations and topics. (p. 136)

Cronkhite accepts conclusions derived from atheoretical post hoc theory building in this review. The fallacy of assuming that biological sex increases persuasibility based on the coincidence of the two events in time negates consideration of other variables. As Copi (1972) observes: "the mere fact of coincidence or temporal succession does not establish any causal connection" (p. 82). Post hoc explanations for sex differences were based on early researchers' predispositions to construct hypotheses in terms of male/female binary opposition, an assumption well-articulated by Cronkhite's statement: "The evidence seems to indicate overwhelmingly that women are generally more persuasible than are men" (1969, p. 136). That statement represented both antecedent assumptions of binary logic and consequential results that account for the emerging differences derived by early researchers. Such a determinative statement exemplifies Derrida's (1976) master-concept, *différance*: the illusion that one or more meanings are immediate and present and that one is conscious of those meanings, when in fact, such a clarity in comprehension is not the case. "*Différance* becomes the condition . . . for the possibility and impossibility of conceptualization, idealization, comprehension" (Orniston, 1988, p. 48).

Différance becomes significant when one realizes that not until twenty years into the first of the two marked periods within the gender and persuasibility discursive formation were there any theoretical connections. Interconnections regarding sex difference results were constructed from reports of research based on a varied range of thematic choices that included relationships as divergent as the effects of ethos on public speaking (Haiman, 1949) to the influence of scattered versus compact seating on audience response (Furbay, 1965). Sex difference results often were sought secondarily until the landmark Janis and Field study (1959), followed by a similar study by Scheidel (1963). The research became a system of dispersion rather than the linear progression one might expect from theory building by extension.

Janis and Field's (1959) famous Yale study of sex differences and personality as factors in persuasibility is a cornerstone in the discursive formation, and, as such, it is a specific authority, or what Foucault (1972) identifies as a "link point of systematization" (p. 66). Traces of Janis and Field's (1959) study have pervaded the gender and persuasibility discourse to such a degree that Eagly (1978) has called it the "Janis and Field (1959) experimental paradigm" (p. 91).

Janis and Field (1959) conceptualized "persuasibility factor" as "any variable attribute within a population that is correlated with consistent individual differences in responsiveness to one or more classes of influential communications" (pp. 1-2). Alpha bias emerges in Janis and Field's (1959) description of their experimentation when they state that "a sex comparison was made to test further the hypothesis (derived from earlier studies of suggestibility) that females in our society tend to be more persuadable than males" (p. 56). Janis and Field's (1959) statement identifying the direction of their hypothesis was extracted from a previous study by Terman, Johnson, Kuznets, and McNemar (1946) that appeared in *Manual of Child Psychology*. The source from which the hypothesis was derived reveals the researchers' belief (or unconscious predisposition) that females (as objects in a general category based solely on biological sex) exist in a state of perpetual childhood. It is possible that this assumption might have been an influence in Janis and Field's (1959) decision to draw upon an easily accessed sample population of high school juniors for subjects. That group may have represented the general population in 1959 in terms of average educational level, but the choice of such a sample neglected effects of psychological maturation. In addition, "influential communications" that the high school juniors were asked to read and give their opinions about were articles dealing with civil defense, medical research, politics, and radio and television programs—all written by male authors about almost exclusively male occupations at that time.

Androcentrism repeatedly surfaces in thematic choices and other methodological aspects of Janis and Field's research (1959). Janis and Field (1959) unknowingly confessed to such a bias, stating that they indeed were operating on the "assumption that cultural determinants of persuasibility tend to be relatively stronger in females than males" (p. 67). But the "culture" to which they refer was incorporated into their research only as male culture in the form of written articles about topics distant from the lives of women in 1959. What Janis and Field (1959)

saw in females as persuasibility factors most likely were "learning effects" that occur when a person who possesses little previous knowledge about a topic is persuaded as a result of trying to find out about a communicator's position. Janis and Field (1959) were blind to their error in excluding female culture. This oversight is revealed in their speculation about whether masculine females, like males, are less persuadable:

If "tomboys" and "masculine" women show essentially the same pattern of correlations between persuasibility and personality factors as we have found in our male sample, our tentative assumption concerning the cultural sources of sex differences in persuasibility could be regarded as something more than merely a speculative ad hoc explanation. (pp. 67-68)

Androcentric assumptions of the Janis and Field (1959) paradigm make the grounds of the theoretical system seem natural, obvious, self-evident, and universal. Yet, such assumptions have their history, their reasons for being the way they are, and their effects on what follows from them. The starting point of the theoretical system is a cultural construct, usually blind to itself (Derrida, 1981). The cultural construct that grounded the ideas in studies that followed Janis and Field (1959) is based on fallacious premises of binary logic, where male objects signify discretion and maturity while female objects signify gullibility and childishness.

Under the guise of theory-building by extension, several studies emerged from the Janis and Field (1959) "paradigm." These inquiries also were based on erroneous premises of binary logic. Studies during the 1960s failed to provide fresh insights into the question of the relationship between sex differences and persuasibility because they replicated Janis and Field's (1959) approach. The studies were framed to solidify the authority of the Janis and Field (1959) "paradigm." Had these researchers' results been accepted (as they were for a decade), the outcome would have been the longstanding domination of a quagmire of conclusions suited to the socio-political goals of a historical period that dictated submissiveness in women.

The earliest, and most important, of the Janis and Field (1959) clone-studies was conducted by Scheidel (1963). Scheidel focused on sex differences in attitude shift, the extent to which the sexes generalize persuasive appeals beyond the specific topic, and the amount of speech

content which they retain. Subjects were undergraduate students enrolled in a speech course. All data were collected in one class period. Scheidel (1963) reported that women showed significantly more attitude shift, transferred the persuasive appeal more, and retained less of the speech. When discussing these results, Scheidel (1963) revealed the influence of anterior authorities like Janis and Field (1959), whose governing function within the discursive formation continued to perpetuate traces of alpha bias. Traces of the origins of this alpha inclination regarding sex differences arise in an attempt by Scheidel (1963) to frame the context of his study with the words: "A summary of earlier studies provides the context for an examination of the significance of the present investigation" (p. 357).

Scheidel (1963) confessed to adapting intentionally a methodology to connect within the environment that surrounded the earlier studies. This act contributed to the alpha bias present in the derived results. The difference in Scheidel's (1963) study and Janis and Field's (1959) is not to be found in message topics, sources, or cultural considerations, but solely in the fact that Scheidel included oral messages instead of written articles. Scheidel (1963) seemed to exhibit awareness of methodological problems when he drew three conclusions: (a) knowledge facilitates retention, (b) previous knowledge does not explain persuasibility, and (c) sound experimental design demands separate analysis for each sex. The first and second conclusions speak to bias which arises from "male" topics and the third is a prescription for customizing experimental design by separating males and females to remedy the confound of differences in prior knowledge. Three alternative meanings for Scheidel's conclusions are: (a) one cannot be taught political policies in 11 minutes without some prior understanding or experience, (b) persuasibility is a multivariate construct that is difficult to conceptualize, and (c) as of 1963, researchers had neglected to include topics associated with female culture in their research.

These considerations failed to impact other studies in which errors similar to Scheidel's (1963) were repeated in the drive to replicate Janis and Field (1959). Much like Scheidel (1963), Whittaker and Meade (1967) and Singh (1970) believed in the anterior assumptions of the Janis and Field (1959) paradigm to such a degree that their research goal was to broaden the scope of the Yale studies results. They sought to determine if sex differences were universal.

In order to universalize Janis and Field's (1959) findings, Whittaker and Meade (1967) replicated the Yale studies' methodology with a sample of American and international students. The subjects read modified versions of the same written materials about the same topics that Janis and Field had used in 1959. Results showed that, at least in American culture, sex differences decreased with age, but this was not universal. Whittaker and Meade (1967) concluded that "differences reflect socially determined sex roles dictating submissiveness in the female and independence in the male" (p. 52). Had Whittaker and Meade (1967) perceived the effects of social determinism in advance, they might have included female culture in the messages and thus avoided the fallacious binary logic embedded in the conception of male independence over female submissiveness. Nevertheless, a subsequent study by Singh (1970) revived Janis and Field (1959) one more time to test a Hindi-speaking, Indian sample. Predictably, Singh (1970) again produced similar results.

The only apparent universalities that existed in the first period of the gender and persuasibility discursive formation were the lack of validity and utility of the binary perspective regarding sex differences in the biological-theoretical paradigm. Theory-building by extension in the 1960s had gone awry, leaving the preliminary discontinuities of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s capped with a final decade of empirical stagnation. By 1974, the system spiraled in a different direction.

1974-1986: The Psychological Conceptual Field

Not until 1974 were the underlying assumptions of the biological-theoretical paradigm challenged. A fracture appeared in the research: Another discontinuous sequence of studies emerged, characterized not by alpha bias but by beta bias, or the inclination to ignore sex differences. This second period of research produced empirical inquiries that gestated in an environment which had become radically altered from its initial androcentric state before 1974. This alteration was the result of the influence of historical/cultural phenomena such as the women's liberation movement. These second period studies were mutations of protest, spawned by the secondary status imposed on females by the philosophical constructions of binary logic during the first period. Second period researchers constructed theories of gender and persuasibility with active aversion for first period theories, which were

seen as devaluing the female experience, wrenching control of meaning from that experience, and dictating to women what they should think.

Despite the backlash against earlier studies, the presence of prior research remained in the very act of empirical revolt. First period research is absent and present in second period discourse because earlier studies are "authorities" whose assumptions were marked for erasure. A rationale for this intention to erase prior assumptions appears in Rosenfeld and Christie's (1974) charge that earlier studies portrayed women as "malleable sex kittens" (p. 244). The irony is that second period researchers set out to erase their predecessors through the same rules of appropriation regarding scientific discourse.

Rosenfeld and Christie (1974) tested sex differences by asking subjects to change neutral attitudes toward meaningless trigrams (groups of three letters such as XOM) "to the attitude that they held for the nouns associated with the trigrams" (p. 248). Those who did this were deemed more persuasible. They found no more attitude change in women than in men in 13 out of 15 comparisons. Conclusions were that content-bound results should not be used to support conclusions and that women are growing away from "traditional" dependence upon others.

Rosenfeld and Christie's (1974) first observation concerning effects of content-bound results reflected a desire to distance themselves from previous studies which had excluded female experience from the content of persuasive communications. This desire to erase errors led Rosenfeld and Christie (1974) to employ their trigram approach, a method in which an absence of meaning (which the researchers called "neutrality") was posed as the solution to the content problem in persuasive messages. By erasing meaning, Rosenfeld and Christie (1974) compromised their research. The trigram method erased persuasion as a concept meaning to induce to believe or convince, and replaced that concept with free association. Thus, the researchers reject persuasion as a process in humans that is (to some degree) content-bound and context dependent. The most pronounced question about Rosenfeld and Christie's (1974) results was whether it is possible to produce new meanings by transferring attitudes about isolated nouns to meaningless configurations composed of letters of the alphabet.

Nevertheless, Rosenfeld and Christie (1974) did articulate an influential new assumption with their second conclusion that women are growing away from traditional dependence (although none of their methods or empirical results supported that conclusion). Rosenfeld and

Christie's (1974) separation of women from traditional dependence was the first overt social statement in second period research. Following the Rosenfeld and Christie study of 1974, a "question everything" paradigm would emerge to set off a new wave of gender and persuasibility studies as problematic as the original studies conducted between 1930 and 1959. Second wave studies, like the originals, covered a range of thematic choices: from androgyny (Montgomery & Burgoon, 1977; Montgomery & Burgoon, 1980) to the significance of the sex of researchers (Ward, Seccombe, Bendel, & Carter, 1985).

The epicenter of the new paradigm was a radically different perspective on gender as an object of inquiry. Bem (1974) reconfigured the concept of gender by offering researchers a measurement of psychological androgyny in the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI). Bem conceptualized gender as a continuous variable of psychological self-attributions, from masculine to feminine and all points in between. The BSRI consists of sixty personality characteristics which Bem (1974) believed were items that are perceived to differentiate aspects of gender. Twenty characteristics were deemed masculine, twenty feminine, and twenty neutral. Bem (1974) selected the items according to whether 100 college students considered them more masculine or feminine. Constructed to measure psychological gender, the BSRI allowed for measurement of a wide range of gender orientations from masculine to androgynous to feminine.

Bem's (1974) multifaceted conception of gender as a psychological orientation represented an alternative to the bipolar conception of sex differences in the biological-theoretical paradigm. The BSRI temporarily dissolved tenets of binary logic regarding biological sex. The BSRI seemed the antithesis of the more parsimonious, but less inclusive, binary conception of sex differences based on biological conditions. However, due to an institutionalized societal system of signification inextricably bound to androcentric Western epistemology, Bem (1974) failed to break from binary logic with the item pool collected for the BSRI.

Having categorized twenty masculine items, twenty feminine items, and twenty neutral items, Bem (1974) actually constructed twenty separate binary opposites dependent on perceptions of 100 college students whose conceptualizations were directly derived from their cultural experiences. The twenty neutral terms reveal traces of Bem's (1974) conception of an idealized center, a privileged other—the

midpoint on the binary continuum. This ideal other is perceived by Bem as defying the social system of binary signification that bore the masculine and feminine items. Androgyny is the perfect center, a blend of the best of the binary. But, as such, androgyny never exists beyond binary logic and is confined to that system of signification. Thus, androgyny became another divisive element in gender research.

Montgomery and Burgoon (1977; 1980) assumed the validity of the BSRI as a measure of psychological gender orientation. The researchers utilized the BSRI in two gender and persuasibility studies in lieu of a two-valued binary conception of sex differences. In their first study, they supported the hypothesis that "traditionally sex-typed females will change their attitudes significantly more than will traditionally sex-typed males . . . this difference will be greater than the difference between androgynous males and females" (1977, p. 132).

In their second study, Montgomery and Burgoon (1980) examined effects of androgyny and message expectations on resistance to persuasive messages. They believed sex-type of the source would create expectations in the receiver about the message and that positive expectancy violations would induce change, whereas negative violations would inhibit change. They also believed that positive or negative violations depended on the sex-type of the receiver (as assessed by the BSRI).

The experiment "involved making a decision about where children in a financially troubled orphanage should be taken on a field trip" (Montgomery & Burgoon, 1980, p. 60). A nontraditionally sex-typed male, "a male nurse, member of the artisan's guild, and one who works with small children and enjoys cooking" (p. 61), advocated a football game as an option. A traditionally sex-typed male, "a member of the track team, physical education major, construction worker, and one who enjoys outdoor activities" (p. 61), advocated an arts and crafts show. Montgomery and Burgoon (1980) supported a three-way interaction between expectancy and source sex-type and receiver sex-type. "Results indicated no significant attitude differences among traditional receivers" (p. 65).

The first study (Montgomery & Burgoon, 1977) found "traditionally sex-typed females demonstrating *more* positive attitudes than androgynous females" (p. 133). The opposite occurred among traditionally sex-typed males and androgynous males. However, in the 1980 study, where differences in attitude change between traditionally sex-

typed males and females were directly tested, sans androgyny, no significant main effects for sex-type occurred. The 1977 and 1980 results fail to support one another because significant differences in attitude change were found between traditional sex-types and androgynous sex-types, but none were found between traditionally sex-typed, extreme ends of the Bem continuum.

Perhaps the artificial sex-typed sources confounded the results? Could a male "nurse-artist-babysitter-cook" advocating a football game or an "athlete-construction worker-outdoorsman" advocating an art show have been too extreme to warrant believable message expectancy violations? One is hard-pressed to produce reflections of such personae in society at large. An additional extremity was Montgomery and Burgoon's jaded conception of persuasibility as "an enduring personality syndrome" (1977, p. 130) which nears the definition of a mental illness. By arguing that "people high in persuasibility would be expected to have extremely unstable attitude structures" (p. 130), the researchers deny content and contextual factors associated with successful and unsuccessful persuasion (which undermines their own study); instead, they label persuasibility as a relatively enduring affliction to which traditionally sex-typed females are most readily susceptible. The Montgomery and Burgoon studies (1977; 1980) were trend-setters, but they mistakenly used the BSRI to support traditional conceptualizations of men and women and linked those stereotypes to an excessive definition of persuasibility. The researchers displayed strong adherence to binary logic in their thinking, the predisposition from which they tried to break.

As second period research progressed into the 1980s, researchers identified a bias associated with sex of researchers who conducted gender and persuasibility studies. Eagly and Carli (1981) conducted a meta-analysis of the research which supported a link between alpha and beta biases and the biological sex of researchers. They supported the hypothesis that sex of researchers was a factor in determining sex differences (1981). Male researchers obtained larger sex differences in the direction of greater persuasibility, whereas female researchers found no sex difference. Eagly and Carli (1981) concluded that "researchers may design, implement, or report their studies in a way that results in an egotistical or flattering portrayal of the attributes of their own gender" (p. 17).

Ward, Seccombe, Bendel, and Carter (1985) continued on the metatheoretical path with the assumption that "status inequalities in the larger society influence sex differences in persuasion in experimental contexts through the confirmation of role-related expectancies" (p. 269). They hypothesized that "reports of greater female persuasibility may have been confounded by the cross-sex content of the communication situation" (p. 269). Moderate support was derived.

The metatheoretical mode adopted by researchers who followed Montgomery and Burgoon (1977; 1980) challenged prior researchers' assumptions of objectivity across both periods of the discursive formation. Metatheoreticians paired alpha bias with male researchers and beta bias with female researchers within an environment that appeared to affect results according to experimenters' awareness of existing status inequalities in society. The presence of these metatheoretical accusations in the progression (or digression) of second period research was one of empirical confession or acknowledgment of failure to escape the binary logic that underpins the variable-analytic tradition.

Becker (1986) followed earlier metatheoretical inquiries of the 1980s with another meta-analysis of the gender and persuasibility research that challenged results of the Eagly and Carli (1981) meta-analysis. Becker (1986) reported that though several of the predictors were significant, the Eagly and Carli (1981) model did not adequately explain the variability in the outcomes of previous studies. Becker concluded that "any claims of simple experimenter bias or expectancy (e.g., women conform more when male investigators expect that they will) must be qualified: perhaps women conform more because the norm group is larger or the test was longer or the message was stronger" (p. 204).

Becker's meta-analysis marked an impasse in a discursive formation that had evolved in disparate directions for over fifty years. By 1986 it was evident that gender and persuasibility research was riddled with extraneous influences and multidirectional biases. Becker's criticisms of Eagly and Carli's (1981) quantification of previous studies spoke to inherent problems of statistical analysis in social scientific inquiries in general: whether researchers accurately measure highly complex, multivariate, psychological constructs. Whatever speculation may be offered, it is evident that the discursive formation that is gender and persuasibility imploded after fifty years, leaving the debris

of mute results and a number of questions—theoretical and metatheoretical.

Discussion

Gender and persuasibility research leaves no trace of generalizability of human behavior. After fifty years of experimentation, it remains unknown whether women and men differ in persuasibility, nor can we be sure it matters (O'Keefe, 1990). Yet, women and men still are treated as distinct audiences requiring specific appeals and messages. Androgyny, often confused with homosexuality or bisexuality, confounds the issue.

Theory growth by extension, assumed by many scientists to be a logical, orderly process (Littlejohn, 1992), is challenged in the body of theory addressing gender and persuasibility. Two periods of research marked by opposing biases, and by post hoc theorizing in the first period, call into question any consistency or linearity in the logic of explanation that could constitute theory. Only fragmented findings remain that loosely connect because sex differences, gender, and persuasibility were objects of inquiry.

Deconstruction demonstrates the impossibility of eliminating the influence of culturally ingrained systems of signification that confound objectivity implied by empiricism. A case in point is the second period of gender and persuasibility research, in which the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) was utilized to operationalize gender. The BSRI translates socially constructed attitudes about men and women into a synoptic system of signification embodied by the instrument. The reflective signification system constructed by the BSRI perpetuates the oppositional identity inherent in society. The centerpoint, androgyny, a concept which promised to liberate the bipolar system of sex roles, is a fusion of traditional traits that Putnam claims "fails to divorce gender from assumptions of duality" (1982, p. 1). In addition, the BSRI fails to account for major cultural shifts in assumptions about gender which occur over time. Fecteau, Jackson, and Dindia (1992) attest to temporal problems regarding current perceptions of masculine and feminine traits in the BSRI. They claim that it cannot be discerned when the BSRI and similar scales "began to lose content validity" (p. 31).

The difficulty in understanding how gender relates to communicative behavior repeatedly has been debated (Putnam, 1982; Rakow, 1986). Prior assumptions and research practices which utilize gender

as an independent variable are suspect. One school of thought, articulated by Putnam, suggests that gender more appropriately would be researched as a dependent variable where communicative behaviors define gender. Persuasibility consistently has been categorized as a personality trait, a dependent variable. If gender were categorized as a dependent variable, entirely different cognitive processes could be revealed, perhaps paving the way for research connected to a comprehensive framework such as Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM).

To date, however, the work of Petty and Cacioppo (1986) has failed to link gender to the persuasion process. A single experiment (Cacioppo & Petty, 1980) was conducted to test gender as a peripheral cue in cognitive processing based on prior knowledge of topic. That study was confounded by alpha bias in Cacioppo and Petty's (1980) use of football and fashion photographs as persuasive materials designed to exaggerate biological sex differences. Equating biological sex differences with gender, they exhibited the same archaic, binary assumptions of first period researchers.

At this juncture, the very proposition that gender plays a critical role in attitude change is questionable. Eagly and Wood (1985) argue that gender as a personality trait is compromised across situation and therefore does not function in the simple manner that researchers assume. They suggest that "perceived demands inherent in social roles and the impact that status-based expectancies have on behavior" (1985, p. 250) may illuminate gender-related behavior and influenceability. Therefore, status differences relating to social roles require examination, especially in light of expectancies for persuasibility when gender and status interact to produce power differentials in public settings.

Similarly, examination of authority, a criterion in deconstruction, displays academic willingness to accept readily precedent with regard to gender. In contemporary textbooks (Pearson, Turner, & Todd-Mancillas, 1991) the reader, who usually is a student, is led to believe that gender is a valuable predictor of persuasibility. The resulting uncritical adherence to precedent subjugates creative thinking and reduces textbooks to onerous descriptions of research findings rather than vehicles for teaching critical thinking skills.

Deconstruction questions science as absolute authority and advocates holistic critical analysis. Theory, after all, is a social construction subject to multiple interpretations over time. Adherence to a past which

constrains the present is a fallacy of relevance. To the question, "Should scientists reopen the case of gender and persuasibility?" the most logical answer is "no." There are too many reasons to believe that inconsistencies surrounding this body of theory render the relationship null. Deconstruction has revealed biases in a body of research plagued with false assumptions about the behavior of women and men. By levelling the discourse, researchers are liberated to pursue alternative directions to construct knowledge that cor(responds) with the present rather than the fallacious perspectives of a largely meaningless past.

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